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U of L alum creates animated movie as a tribute to Fort McMurray

Back Home Again, a 30-minute animated movie by University of Lethbridge alum Michael Mankowski (BMgt '10), has been five years in the making and is now ready for the big screen.

The film is a tribute to his hometown of Fort McMurray and has an all-star voice cast that includes Martin Short, Tom Green, Michael J. Fox, Catherine O'Hara, Howie Mandel, Lorne Cardinal, Gordon Pinsent, Kim Basinger and the late Norm Macdonald and Ed Asner, to name a few.



“Back Home Again is an animated re-imagining of what it was like for us to be evacuated from Fort McMurray and the Wood Buffalo forest told from the perspective of animal characters,” he says. “This is a non-profit project. All the actors donated their time. It really is a love letter for me.”

Mankowski has submitted the film to more than 50 international film festivals. It premiered at the Edmonton International

Film Festival (EIFF) Oct. 2 and 3 and received a Jury Award for the Best Animated Short (Alberta). The EIFF is also screening [*Back Home Again* online](#) for Alberta for the month of October.

Mankowski hopes the film is a conversation starter for community, hope and mental health. To that end, the film will point people to mental health resources currently under development with the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA).

“It was recently the five-year anniversary of the fire, and my community is still hurting,” he says. “There are a lot of people who are still struggling, and a lot of people haven’t rebuilt yet.

It's a hard thing. I hope this film helps us talk about mental health and that we can use it in other communities affected by wildfires and other disasters."

Mankowski, who was born and raised in Fort McMurray, owned and operated a video production company in the city. Things were going well; he did video work for local companies and non-profit organizations and was all set to begin work on a feature film with Tom Green. Then came the 2016 wildfire.

"I was evacuated from the community like everyone else," says Mankowski. "The Red Cross called me, and I got the opportunity to go in and film videos and be one of the first to go back into our community."

He began recording interviews with people who were affected by the fire and had lost their homes. He spoke with town officials, teachers, firefighters, Indigenous leaders and the Prime Minister and ended up recording more than 200 interviews.

"Working for the Red Cross, all those selfish feelings I had completely vanished when I started filming interviews of a family and a child talking about what they lost or an Indigenous fur trader talking, not only about the home he lost that he can maybe rebuild, but how all the animals and his way of life were gone," says Mankowski. "It was very emotional, but at the same time I thought my problems were nothing compared to what other people were going through."

He continued producing video for various organizations at both the one-year and two-year anniversaries of the fire and had many powerful stories that were still untold.

"Ultimately, I started writing this project, an animated film, from the perspective of animals," he says. "I took those stories and told them from the perspective of these woodland creatures, what it was like to be evacuated from the forest, what it was like to be separated from your home for several months, and what it was like to come back and rebuild as a community."

Mankowski decided to learn animation for himself. He moved to Vancouver, B.C. and entered a one-year 3D animation program at the Vancouver Film School.

"I jumped in with no art background and was completely overwhelmed," he says. "It was definitely the best thing I ever did because it allowed me to work on this project. When I finished that program, I had another six months of just working on all the storyboards and getting that ready."

Mankowski started reaching out to actors in 2017, but the all-star cast got a big boost when John Schneider, Green's manager, reached out to his network.

“Every person who lent their voice to the movie reminded me of someone in our community or someone I worshipped growing up, so it was a way to get all the people I love in one movie,” he says. “I never thought I’d have even one of these people — it was just surreal.”

The community rallied behind the film, with Fort McMurray and Wood Buffalo Economic Development & Tourism, the CMHA, Canadian Red Cross and Paul Davis, a restoration company, becoming sponsors of the project.

Eventually, he expects the film will be available for free, but those plans are still in the works. The song *Back Home Again* will be released this fall. To keep up with news about the film, visit [Back Home Again](#) and follow @BackHomeAgainMovie on Facebook and Instagram. The [official movie trailer](#) was launched Sept. 18 through EIFF.

[Read online.](#)

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Contact

Caroline Zentner, public affairs adviser

University of Lethbridge

403-795-5403

caroline.zentner@uleth.ca